

Billy Carter Service Station  
216 W. Church Street  
Plains  
Sumter County  
Georgia

HABS No. GA-243

HABS,  
GA.

131-PLAIN

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

Addendum to  
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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Washington, DC 20013-7127

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GA,  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BILLY CARTER SERVICE STATION  
(Mill Jennings' Service Station)

Addendum to  
HABS No. GA-243

Location: 216 West Church Street (north side of Highway 280 between Hudson and Bond streets), Plains, Sumter County, Georgia.

USGS Plains Georgia Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:  
Zone 16, E 746130 N 3S47000.

Present Owner: Bobby Salter.

Present Use: BJ's Pitt Stop, a Phillips 66 gasoline station, minor auto-repair shop, and convenience store selling souvenirs and peanuts.

Significance: During Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign in 1975-76, much attention was lavished on this service station, then owned by his colorful and outspoken younger brother, Billy. He considered his station a social rather than a business venture and it served as a hangout for his "down home fraternity," where men would gather to drink beer and shoot the breeze after work. The media capitalized on the service station as a symbol of Jimmy's rural southern upbringing. The building was maintained in its run-down, informal state and became a stronghold for the local residents who were disenchanted with the drastic changes taking place in Plains with Carter's ascendancy to the White House. Billy used it as the headquarters for his unsuccessful campaign as the "No Progress" candidate for mayor of Plains.<sup>1</sup>

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1930s.
2. Original and subsequent owners: The following is a chain of title to the land on which the structure stands. Records are from the Clerk's Office, Sumter County Courthouse, Americus, Georgia.  
  
1920 Deed July 2, 1920, Book VV, page 452. B.T. Wise purchased the parcel known as the Hotel Lot from M.H. Campbell. It included a hotel and house.

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<sup>1</sup> Stapleton, Brother Billy, 1978.

BILLY CARTER SERVICE STATION  
(Mill Jennings Service Station)  
Addendum to HABS No. GA-243 (Page 2)

- 1947 Deed September 3, 1947, Deed Book 36, page 94. Millard M. Jennings purchased a vacant lot known as the "hotel property" from B.T. Wise.
- 1972 Deed June 15, 1972, Deed Book 124, page 146. William A. Carter II and P.J. Wise purchased "a vacant lot known as the hotel property" from M.M. Jennings.
- 1972 Deed August 1972, Deed Book 155, page 572. P.J. Wise sold his half interest in the property to William A. Carter II.
- 1981 Deed February 9, 1981, Plat Book 12, page 249. A survey of the land owned by William Alton Carter II includes 0.871 acres bordered by Hudson and Church streets, as well as the 0.391-acre plot on which the station now stands.
- 1981 Deed April 7, 1981, Deed Book 192, page 298. William A. Carter II sold all of his property on Hudson Street to the City of Plains for \$20,000, with the help of realtor Donald J. Carter.
- 1981 Deeds August 19, 1981, Deed Book 193, pages 493-494. Roy G. Bertrand of Waukegan, Illinois, purchased 0.391 acres as well as the larger adjacent lot from Donald J. Carter, Arthur Cheokas, James H. Murray, and Leonard Meadows for \$54,000. In a separate quit claim deed, William and Sybil Carter released all interest in the property to Roy Bertram for \$1.00. Present owner Bobby Salter explained that Bertram was a journalist who bought the service station at an auction that was televised for an audience in Illinois in what he confessed was a publicity stunt. The same day he purchased the station he began arrangements to sell it to Salter, a Plains native.
- 1981 December 22, 1981, Deed Book 195, page 542. Roy G. Bertram sold the 0.391 acres on which the station stands to Bobby Salter for \$30,000.
3. Original plans and construction: None have been located.
4. Alterations and additions: A break in the interior walls and roofline indicate that originally the building was a simple, rectangular gable-front structure. The back room with the catslide roof was added by Billy Carter after he purchased it in 1972. When he began selling beer at the station, he added a 8'-0" x 12'-0" refrigerator in the rear. Since he purchased it in 1981, Salter enclosed the shed area on the west facade to use as an office. An explosion at the station caused some exterior

BILLY CARTER SERVICE STATION  
(Mill Jennings Service Station)  
Addendum to HABS No. GA-243 (Page 3)

damage and an approximately 5' x 6' rectangular area on the east facade is clad with newer boards used to repair the damage.

- B. Historical Context: In the 1920-30s, the service-station lot was the site of a large, two-story hotel used by many people who came to Plains for treatment at the Wise Sanitarium. Records show that the hotel and property were owned by Burr Thaddeus Wise, one of the hospital's founders, and during its years of operation had several different managers, including Ernest and Rosa Dean, a Mr. Aiken, Walter Kennedy and Flora Markette Kennedy.<sup>2</sup> The hospital was torn down sometime between 1937-48 and the property was left vacant until 1956 when Mill Jennings (1909-72) opened his Amoco Service Station there. He first owned a service station in a wood building on the west end of the Main Street business block, but he wanted to move his business to a busier street. He purchased the frame structure from the Jones Sprinkler Company (now the Jones Piping Company), which had been in operation in Plains since 1933, and moved it to the "hotel lot."<sup>3</sup> The building was originally built by the Jones family for their daughter who used it as a practice room for ballet.<sup>4</sup>

Billy Carter (1937-88) purchased the station in 1972, and installed cast-off furniture in the storage area and a cooler that was always full of beer. He barely cleared a profit on gasoline sales and repairs, but saw the station as the mainstay of his social life in Plains. When he got a license to sell beer, many in the Southern Baptist town balked, although men had been gathering at local service stations to drink and socialize ever since Jimmy Carter was a child, as he vividly recounted in Why not the Best? During Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign, tourists and the media flocked to the station to meet Billy, who was becoming a celebrity in his own right for his offbeat humor and frankness. But although Billy regaled in the attentions of the press, he soon tired of the rapid commercialization of his hometown, caused by his brother's ascendancy to the White House; on a whim he decided to run for mayor, to combat the changes taking place in Plains. As his sister Ruth wrote, "not a speck of dust nor a dirty rag was removed to impress the electorate. 'No Progress' was his slogan, and his station still stands as an example of prosperity without progress in a town gone dolled up commercial for the tourists."<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the time Billy owned the station, he was also running the family peanut business located across the street. The importance of the station in his life became apparent, however, when a spark from one of the drink machines set off an explosion in August 1976. The explosion occurred during a

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<sup>2</sup> Walters, 1985, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Wiggins, 1989 interview.

<sup>4</sup> Sybil Carter, 1989 interview.

<sup>5</sup> Stapleton, 1978, p. 128.

softball game between the Secret Service staff sent to protect the Carters during the campaign, and Billy's cronies on the adjacent field. Seeing the flames, Billy ran to the station from the field and cried, "It's the only thing I've got."<sup>6</sup>

The station again received media attention when Roy Bertram, an Illinois journalist, purchased the station at an auction in 1981. The bidding was televised in Illinois as a publicity stunt. Bobby Salter, the station's current owner, negotiated with Bertram the same day as the auction to buy it from him. Salter, a close friend of Billy, said he stopped by the station almost daily until his death from cancer in 1988. Salter said the one piece of advice Billy gave him was to not repeat his error of selling beer there. Salter followed the advice and now sells peanuts, (dried, roasted or boiled), to the tourists and regulars who frequent the station. Salter said he wants to keep the station pretty much as it was when Billy ran it and has made only minor changes and repairs.<sup>7</sup>

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This vernacular, gable-front utilitarian structure has been adapted over the years to suit the needs of its occupants. Purely functional, these adaptations to the frame structure have been made in a haphazard, organic fashion.
2. Condition of fabric: Good. Its shabby appearance is intentional.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This is a 23'-0" x 37'-0" one-story rectangular, front-facing gable structure; a dual-pitch roofed addition on the back extends the store and houses bathroom facilities. Attached to the north wall of this addition is another small, front-facing gable structure housing a large walk-in cooler. An additional shed on the rear of the west side has been enclosed to form a side office. A 23'-0 x 23'-0", flat canopy extends from the front of the structure, just under the peak of the gable, to the gas pumps.
2. Foundations: The front of the structure sits on a concrete slab that forms a stoop; the rear portion is supported by concrete-block piers.
3. Walls: Simple horizontal dropboards clad the main block and addition.

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<sup>6</sup> Carter, 1989 interview.

<sup>7</sup> Salter, 1989 interview.

BILLY CARTER SERVICE STATION  
(Mill Jennings Service Station)  
Addendum to HABS No. GA-243 (Page 5)

These are painted pale yellow in contrast to the bright red cornerboards. The cooler at the rear is clad with gray asbestos sheet siding. The office area attached on the west facade is built of large plywood boards, unpainted and attached in a rather piecemeal fashion in the rear, and somewhat neater and painted yellow to match the rest of the structure in the front.

4. Structural system, framing: Wood frame. The west-side addition is supported by two iron poles at the low end of the shed roof. Three evenly spaced iron poles support the front end of the flat canopy that extends from the front of the structure.
5. Stoops: A 4"-thick concrete slab with rounded corners forms a low platform around the front of the station.
6. Chimneys: There is an interior, square, brick chimney on the rear gable end, east of the ridge of the original structure.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Almost the entire front/south facade under the closed gable is taken up by the windows and doors placed flush against each other. Within the closed gable is a red rectangular door leading to the attic. The entrance is located in the westernmost bay of the south facade. It is a six-light, three-cross-panel door painted red. In the easternmost bay is a six-cross-panel door intended as an employee entrance, but is now blocked off. Two additional exterior doors lead to the men's and ladies' bathrooms in the added rear section. The entrance to the former is on the east side of the rear facade, and the entrance to the latter is in the rear of the east facade. Another red, six-panel door leads to the south side of the west addition.
  - b. Windows and shutters: The central space between the two doors on the gable-front south facade contains two windows flush with each other and the flanking doors. The west window is six-over-six-light double-hung wood sash; next to it is a fixed twenty-four-light window. Both have red trim and white muntins. There is also a band of three four-over-four-light double-hung wood on the west facade of the store. There are no windows on the east or north facades, nor in the office addition on the west side.
8. Roof
  - a. Shape, covering: A low-pitch gabled shingle roof covers the

original rectangular structure. The rear addition has a catslide roof. The roofing is continuous on the west side, revealing that the roof was reshingled after the rear section was added. The catslide is on the east side with the shallow, sloped part covering the bathrooms. The cooler has a shallow, front-facing gable roof; the office addition on the east side has a shingled shed roof. An abbreviated shed roof with shingles closes the gable of the front facade.

- b. Cornice, eaves: The open-eaved roof reveals fifteen exposed rafters in the original block. The exposed rafters and the abbreviated shed roof in the front gable form an ersatz pediment.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The interior of the original building is a single, large rectangular room. The westernmost two-thirds of the rear addition extends this space. The eastern portion is divided into three bathrooms; the southernmost facility opens into the interior, the other two are accessed from the outside. In the center of the back wall is a door leading to the walk-in refrigerator. To the right of the cooler is a wall air-conditioning unit. A door to the shed area that Salter walled in is located on the west wall.
2. Flooring: Concrete.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls throughout are covered with a simulated wood-grain contact paper. The walls are obscured by a collection of posters and items for sale. The juncture of the original and rear sections is apparent. The ceiling is covered with acoustical tile.
4. Doorways and doors: The rear wall is dominated by a large red door that leads to the walk-in refrigerator. A six-cross panel door leads to the side office; a one-panel door leads to the bathroom.
5. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: An air conditioning unit is located on the back wall.
  - b. Lighting: Fluorescent strip.
  - c. Plumbing: Each bathroom includes a toilet and sink. There is an additional double sink unit on the east wall of the back portion of the store.



BILLY CARTER SERVICE STATION  
(Mill Jennings Service Station)  
Addendum to HABS No. GA-243 (Page 7)

- d. Refrigeration: The 8'-0" x 12'-0" walk-in refrigerator was installed by Billy Carter when he began selling beer at the station in 1972. Salter uses it to store peanuts.
- e. Peanut roaster: Salter has installed a peanut roaster on the front counter, and he often presents a cup of freshly roasted peanuts to visitors.
- f. Air pump: Toward the front of the west facade is an air pump.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting and orientation: The station faces south onto Highway 280 and is set back about 30' from the road. Two curb cuts allow cars to enter and exit easily. Two gas pumps stand in front of the station on a raised concrete platform, which also serves as the base for the three poles supporting the canopy.
- 2. Historic landscape design: A row of four wood auditorium chairs span the area in front of the windows. East of these chairs is a Pepsi machine. The two gas pumps are anchored on an oval slab in front of the station. The area in front of the building is paved while, grass grows around the back and east side of the station. Many old cars in various states of disrepair are parked in this grassy area behind the station. The service area is west of the station.
- 3. Outbuildings:
  - a. Barn: In the grassy area east of the station is a large corrugated-metal barn. The front-facing gabled structure has a large doorway on the south facade that has been removed. Each side facade has a large window on the south and a smaller six-over-one-light double-hung sash to the north. It is on a concrete foundation and is painted to match the station in yellow with red trim. Its rafters are also the same shape as on the service station.
  - b. Detached shed: Directly adjacent to the office area on the west of the structure is a small wood front-facing gable-roofed shed. It has a standing-seam metal shed roof to the rear and another on the side. Used for auto part storage, this shed is in poor condition.
  - c. Service area. A large, rectangular angled canopy covers a service area in front of the detached shed to the west of the service

BILLY CARTER SERVICE STATION  
(Mill Jennings Service Station)  
Addendum to HABS No. GA-243 (Page 8)

station. The roof is corrugated metal supported on six metal poles, three on each side. It covers a single car lift where oil changes, tune-ups, and balances are performed. Along either side are large concrete racks for stacking tires.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Early Views: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Conservation aerial photographs: 6-21-1937, hotel is still standing on lot; 3-25-48,0 hotel has been torn down, lot is empty; 3-28-1953, lot is empty; 12-1-1956, service station only - no outbuildings; 10-24-62, barn to east (still there) shed to west.

- B. Interviews:

Carter, Sybil, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, August 31, 1989, Plains, Georgia.

Salter, Bobby, current owner, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, June 26, 1989, Plains, Georgia.

Wiggins, Ralph, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, August 23, 1989, Plains, Georgia.

- C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed and plat books, Clerk's Office, Sumter County Courthouse, Americus, Georgia.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Stapleton, Ruth Carter, Brother Billy, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978.

Walters, Beth, History of Plains, Georgia, 1885-1985, Americus, Ga.: Gammage Print Shop, 1985.

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